



*Pastor's Pen*

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- Fr. Tom Wilson, Pastor

## **LESSONS FROM THE MOUNTAIN**

As many of you know, I recently hiked Mount Bierstadt near Georgetown, Colorado, just over an hour from Denver. The peak of the summit is 14,065 feet. That's high and the air is thin. The views are majestic, and God provided perfect weather conditions for the hike, which can routinely be a bit dicey. I am grateful to have made it to the summit. It wasn't easy. It was a worthy and challenging experience. I learned a lot. Below are a few of the lessons I learned from the mountain that are as applicable to the spiritual life as they are to hiking.

**THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PREPARATION.** Many parishioners have seen me at the local fitness center using the Stairmaster. It is a routine cardio exercise for me, but as the hike got closer, it was critical to add time to my regimen and be at maximum incline on the treadmill for longer periods. I didn't over train. Every minute spent was necessary and worth it. Without that preparation, there is no way I would have made it. Like our journey to Heaven, it doesn't just happen. It takes conscious preparation and lots of it.

**AN ACT OF MIND, BODY, AND SOUL.** I believed that I was prepped physically, and I consider myself reasonably strong-willed. I found out otherwise as I neared the halfway point, panting in the ascending altitude, looking up to the summit and wondering how and if I could ever complete it. My legs were okay, my lungs were sucking wind, and my spirit was being crushed with the idea that I might not make it. My body, my will, and the grace of God working in the soul needed to combine to make it happen. The climb up the mountain is an act that combines mind, body, and soul, as does the spiritual life. We may feel well-prepared in one area and find out we're not quite as prepared in another.

The combination of the mental, physical and spiritual is akin to the Incarnation, in which Jesus took on our humanity. As human beings, we are not just our minds, bodies, and souls, but who we are is made up of all of them.

**IT'S THE DESTINATION AND THE JOURNEY.** "It's the journey, not the destination" is an often repeated and incomplete adage. I understand the emphasis on the journey, but without a destination, the journey is simply wandering. The journey was a challenge, and the destination was worth it. If we lose sight of the destination of Heaven, the journey is aimless and egocentric. The destination was clear, making the journey worth it.

**ASCENDING AND DESCENDING.** The hike up was grueling and certainly more physically challenging than coming down. On the way down, my breathing was more stable, my quads were not as taxed, and it felt easier. But the descent is also much more dangerous. The faster pace and the fatigue from the ascent make the likelihood of a bad fall much greater coming down. The only injury I saw was to a very fit young man who twisted an ankle in the last third of the descent. When we get to the heights of the spiritual life, we eventually need to come down. We are not meant for permanence on the peak until Heaven. Coming down can cause distraction and remove "the high." Real focus on the journey back, which is easier in some ways, can create a dangerous crash in our spiritual lives.

**WITHOUT BALANCE, YOU FALL.** The last several hundred feet of all peaks above tree line include rocky fields, with terrain that is often unstable. If the hiker is not paying attention, a fall is inevitable. Focusing on the next step and maintaining balance are essential to completing the journey. As we journey toward God, the closer we get, the more likely the enemy is to try and trip us up. Keeping our eyes on the Lord and concentrating on the next step allows us to keep our balance and not fall.

**NO REPLICATION.** Modern exercise facilities do a good job of creating activities and machines to work us out. But Stairmasters, treadmills, and climbing walls are not the real thing and will never be. The replications can easily become fools' gold and may convince us we have an adequate substitute when we don't. Short-cuts in the spiritual life are passed on to us all the time, trying to convince us it is easy. There are no short-cuts and no replications. A relationship with God needs to be the real thing and not a replication.